

Still the address of down-home sounds

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EL CERRITO, Calif. — The sign on the wall of the building that serves as the home of Arhoolie Records here, just north of Berkeley, promises “down home music,” and for 50 years, often operating on a shoestring, and a thin one at that, the label has delivered a rich and quirky mixture of blues, folk, jazz, Cajun, Tex-Mex, country, zydeco and gospel — the full panorama of American roots music — to an equally diverse collection of music fans.

John F. Kennedy had just been elected president when Chris Strachwitz, Arhoolie’s founder and still its owner, sat pasting pictures on the cover of the label’s first LP, “Mance Lipscomb: Texas Sharecropper and Songster.” Driving across the South a few months earlier, Strachwitz had recorded that blues singer at home, dreaming of giving up his job as a high school teacher but never imagining that his homespun venture would outlive some of the world’s largest recording conglomerates.

To commemorate its 50th anniversary, Arhoolie is about to release a four-CD collection of songs, ranging in style from the blues of Jesse Fuller to the free jazz of Sonny Simmons, that Strachwitz recorded between 1954 and 1970 in the San Francisco Bay Area. Called “Hear Me Howling: Blues, Ballads & Beyond,” the package also includes a 136-page book that tells the history of the label; the set will be available for purchase at the company’s website, arhoolie.com, beginning next week and from music stores early in 2011.

Most of Strachwitz’s best-known recordings, though, are from the field, especially in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. That is where, starting in 1960, he found, recorded or helped revive the careers of seminal bluesmen like Bukka White, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Lipscomb, Mississippi Fred McDowell and even Clifton Chenier, the accordion-playing King of Zydeco.

For someone so devoted to American roots music, Strachwitz has an unusual background. Born in Germany in 1931 into an aristocratic family as Count Christian Alexander Maria Strachwitz, he spent his childhood under Nazi rule and came to the United States after World War II as a high school student living originally in Reno, Nev. From the start, he said, the variety of American music styles, especially their driving beat, enthralled him.

“The rhythms haunted me,” he said in an interview in his office, cluttered with records, at Arhoolie’s headquarters and warehouse. “I’d hear all this stuff on the radio, and it just knocked me over. I thought this was absolutely the most wonderful thing I had ever heard.”

Richard K. Spottswood, a prominent musicologist who edited and annotated the Library of Congress’ 15-volume series “Folk Music in America” and is the author of “Ethnic Music on Records,” said that Strachwitz’s role in preserving American vernacular music has been crucial.

“He is probably more American than many of us, but he experienced this music not as something he was born into and took for granted like the air we breathe, but as something rare and delightful, not available to the rest of the world,” Spottswood said. “Coming from another language and culture, he perhaps saw the artistry in

this music a little sooner, a little earlier than the rest of us, and his vision of a kaleidoscopic American musical culture, from Tejano to country and Southwestern blues, has helped thwart the single standard the music industry has tried to impose on us over the years.”

For a generation of folk- and blues-inspired performers, from Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones to Bonnie Raitt and T Bone Burnett, Arhoolie has been a lodestone. In his autobiographical “Chronicles Vol. I,” Dylan, a member of the advisory board of the nonprofit Arhoolie Foundation, credits the label as being the place “where I first heard Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Charlie Patton and Tommy Johnson.”

Ry Cooder, the Grammy Award-winning guitarist and producer, recalled that “I must have been about 13” the day he took a bus to a blues and folk record store in downtown Los Angeles and for the first time heard Big Joe Williams singing ferociously and playing a nine-string guitar, on an album called “Tough Times.” That recording, Arhoolie’s second release, changed his life, Cooder said.

“The whole thing started like it was going to blow up, or fly apart at the seams, and it really took hold of me,” he recalled. “I said to myself, ‘This is what it ought to be like, total physical involvement with the music, going into it so hard that you just about lose control.’”

He added, “It started me on a path of living, the path I am still on.”

At a time long before the Internet the extensive liner notes on the back of Arhoolie recordings — many written by Strachwitz — were a vital source of information about artists considered far outside the mainstream. From recordings put out by Arhoolie, whose name comes from a Southern dialect term for a field holler, budding performers could learn not just about songs, but also the instruments and tunings that performers used.

“I was a big folkie back then, and I would read about the latest releases on Arhoolie in *Sing Out* magazine,” said Raitt, who is also an advisory board member of the foundation, which is dedicated to documenting, preserving and disseminating “authentic, traditional and vernacular music.” “Every one of those records was a treasure. I loved the tasteful artwork on them.” She added, “Chris became an important figure, a monumental link really, from whom I learned a lot, especially about Cajun and Tex-Mex and zydeco and Hawaiian music.”

But Strachwitz is above all a collector. Even now, what strikes those who have worked with him, like the documentary filmmaker Les Blank, who collaborated with Strachwitz on films like “*Chulas Fronteras*,” about Tejano music, and “*J’Ete au Bal*,” about Cajun music, is “the degree of his extreme enthusiasm” for tracking down and acquiring the recordings that interest him.

“He’s like a kid who caught his first fish when he finds one of these groups that he likes, or old 78s he wants to add to his huge collection,” Blank said. “While we were in Texas, he’d hear about a stash, some vendor who once served jukeboxes, his widow and children have a big room full of records, and he’s on to it. He won’t eat or drink or sleep until he gets his hands on it.”

Though he does not speak Spanish, Strachwitz has built what is believed to be the largest private collection of Mexican-American and Mexican music, from mariachi and norteno accordion groups to corridos, with some recordings from as early as a century ago.

“That music had the same appeal to me that the hillbilly music did, this soulful country sound and a lot of duet singing,” he said. “And there was this weird mixture of string music with the trumpet filling in almost like a jazz musician, which I thought was just gorgeous. And the accordions!”

Last year, after the Arhoolie Foundation donated those recordings, the Frontera Collection opened to the public at the University of California, Los Angeles. Recordings are first catalogued and digitized in a small room at the Arhoolie building, then made available through the UCLA library; scholars have already drawn on them for academic papers, theses and a book.

“The range of these nearly 50,000 recordings is amazing, so vast that we don’t yet fully have a handle on it,” said Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA “This is our musical heritage in the broadest sense of the word, and it is remarkable that Chris Strachwitz had the foresight and passion to know how important it was to preserve this.”

As Strachwitz is quick to acknowledge, his collecting obsession can be expensive, and there has never been much money to be made in the line of work he has chosen. But every now and then, mainly through pieces of the publishing rights to songs that have become unlikely hits, he has had lucky strikes that have helped keep his business afloat, if not flourishing.

In 1965 a Berkeley folkie named Joe McDonald wanted to record a newly written protest song on short notice and ended up doing so in Strachwitz’s living room with Strachwitz’s equipment. In exchange, he granted Strachwitz publishing rights to the “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” which four years later became a worldwide sensation when McDonald, by then the leader of the psychedelic band Country Joe and the Fish, performed it at Woodstock and it was included in the movie of the festival. Strachwitz’s share of the royalties on the song, an anthem of opposition to the war in Vietnam, allowed him to put a down payment on the building that is now Arhoolie’s home.

Arhoolie also recorded the bluesman K.C. Douglas, whose “Mercury Boogie” has been a hit numerous times, perhaps most notably in a 1993 country music version by Alan Jackson that became the centerpiece of an ad campaign for the car manufacturer. Douglas had already died by that time. But Strachwitz said one of his most gratifying moments in his career was handing over a royalty check to Mississippi Fred McDowell after the Rolling Stones recorded his “You Gotta Move” for their 1971 album “Sticky Fingers.”

“I got tangled up being a sort of agent for some of them, for Fred and Mance and Lightnin’,” Strachwitz explained. Originally, he said, when he approached the Stones about royalty payments “their lawyers said ‘no, no, no, everything they record is their own stuff.’” But Strachwitz persisted. “Fred was already suffering from cancer,” he said. “But I was very happy to be able to give him a check before he died.”

Those dealings with McDowell are indicative of another trait associated with Strachwitz: his reputation for being upright in his business dealings. “Chris does not exploit his artists, he respects them,” said Raitt, who early in her career played on bills with Arhoolie performers. “That shadow, of people trying to make money off the artist at the artist’s expense, is not there with Chris. He has so much integrity that he really does his utmost to take care of the person as well as the music.”

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